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Abstract

Students' maturational levels, rather than grades or chronological age, should determine enrollment in the middle school. Diversity in maturation rates creates diversity in interests and attitudes. These differences necessitate the development of programs for the middle school which differ from the elementary and high school approaches. Two fundamental areas are grouping and climate for instruction. Separate but related dimensions are involved in student grouping. One facet involves the rate of student growth mentally; the other involves the rate of student growth physically, socially, and emotionally. A flexible school climate can be encouraged by staff attitudes that permit considerable freedom of action to youngsters and also by flexible scheduling. Related documents are EA 002 527 and EA 002 528. (MF)

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The Controversy of the Middle School

by

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The Controversy of the Middle School

My comments today are based on two assumptions which I believe are valid:

First

The philosophy of the middle and/or the junior high school which states that it is a school which bridges the elementary and high schools levels has been organizationally accepted by American Education.

Secondly

The uniqueness of the youngster in the years 10-14 has not been accepted as a basic concept for program development.

Junior high and middle school proponents alike have argued that a separate maturational level exists for youngsters in the middle years. It has pointed out that mentally, physically, and socially youngsters at this age constitute a distinct grouping. Indeed this rationale has been sufficiently powerful to create and maintain a division administratively for this age level.

When we look at program development however, the same pattern has not existed. Consistently emphasis has been placed on one hand on the descriptions of age characteristics of the transescent and then without hesitation educators have applied programs to this level which meet all of the characteristics of the high school adolescent model. Similarly today as the middle school gains impetus, there is some evidence that program developers are beginning to look to the elementary model as a basis for programs. If this latter position is to be the case, I believe the results shall largely be the same -- an excellent "train" running on the wrong "track."

What is clearly needed at this point, in my judgment, is the creative development of programs designed specifically for the transescent. Middle school leaders have challenged former programs for this age level such as departmentalization, high school type schedules, inflexible student grouping,

pressure activities, and secondary staffing. In far too many instances to date, this criticism has left a situation in which programs are barren, non existent, or repeats of former inadequate programs. This does not imply or suggest that we continue the academic argument concerning which grades belong in the middle school. I submit it is not a matter of grades or chronological age but rather it is a matter of youngsters' maturational levels. If a student is in transition from the childhood stage of the elementary to the adolescent of the high school, he is a middle schooler; if he has not begun the transition, he belongs in the elementary school; if he has largely completed transition, he should be placed in the high school.

As this maturation process is considered, it is significant that growth changes do not occur in a uniform manner, rather each child develops according to his own timetable. This diversity in maturation rates creates diversity in interests and attitudes. It is precisely these differences which necessitate the development of programs for the middle school which differ from the elementary and high school approaches.

Relative to the argument which I have presented this far, I would like at this point to suggest two areas which exemplify this thinking. These areas are:

1. Grouping
2. Climate for Instruction

There are, of course, many other areas of specific importance which need emphasis such as curriculum, activity programs, staffing and others; however, I believe that these two areas are fundamental and could provide the basis for change.

Student Grouping

Most approaches to the grouping of youngsters for instruction center on cognitive criteria. Such factors as intelligence, achievement levels, and

aptitude are employed almost exclusively. It is incredible that many educators promote middle school education on the premise that at this level physical, social and emotional learnings are essential while at the same time excluding these factors in a grouping formula. If the middle school is to succeed, attention must be directed at the total characteristics of transescents. In effect, there are two separate but related dimensions involved in student grouping. One facet involves the rate of student growth mentally; the other facet involves the rate of student growth physically, socially, and emotionally. The following matrix illustrates this dual approach to grouping. The matrix is suggested for a school of 600 students - 120 students per learning unit.

	Learning Unit I	Learning Unit II	Learning Unit III	Learning Unit IV	Learning Unit V	
J					30	J
I				30	60	I
H			30	60	30	H
G		30	60	30		G
F	60	60	30			F
E	30	30				E
D	30					D

There is a dual movement possible.

Environment or School Climate

Transescents require a flexible school climate. There should be an attitude among staff that permits youngsters considerable freedom of action. This

position does not suggest chaos, it simply means that the rigid autocratic environment in most schools deters learning. The middle school ought to be a dynamic and active school in which youngsters may pursue learning free of unnecessary restraint. The "open space" concept now prevalent in architecture provides for such interaction; nevertheless, a number of middle schools provide similar involvement in more traditional buildings. It is much more of an attitude than it is "bricks and mortar." As previously intimated, this is an age of dependence moving toward independence. Transescents should begin to acquire self direction with as much adult help as is needed.

One way to facilitate a flexible school climate is through flexible scheduling. Scheduling should enhance learning not deter it. Traditional secondary schedules based on time rather than a performance criteria are inappropriate. The nature of transescence indicates the need for flexibility which best can be accomplished by scheduling blocks of time for each curricular component. In this way, teachers can effectively gauge the learning episode in relation to the current achievement needs of students.

It seems to me then, the promise of the middle school lies in its potential. It presents the educator with immense possibilities for the creation of dynamic programs for this unique age. If educators are content merely to apply the inadequate approaches of the past, middle schools will simply go the route of past organizations. If, however, educators are prepared to study the characteristics and needs of the transescent and are willing to initiate an imaginative approach to curriculum development, the promise of the future for middle school education can be realized.